

## **NOVELS AS THE CULTURAL COORDINATES OF SRI LANKAN EXILE/REFUGEE DIASPORA WITH REFERENCE TO CINNAMON GARDENS OF SHYAM SELVADURAI**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper is an attempt to explore the making of exile/refugee status of Sri Lankan Tamils across the globe due to forced migration during and after the civil war, in the last thirty years.

The paper will investigate the multiple affiliations, linguistic hybridity and cultural locations of Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora. The paper will also examine the strategies Sri Lankan Tamil Diasporic subjects employ to keep their ethnic and cultural identity alive. The use of Tamil radio stations and Tamil newspapers, circulation of Tamil videos, exclusive Tamil Cinema Halls and the use of Tamil Directories could be seen as the means of keeping an ethnic network alive in host nations. The study will also try to locate such social and cultural strategies used to keep the Tamils as a group as reflected in the selected novels. Further, it tries to offer a view of how factors like nationality, faith, linguistic identity, migration, exile and regionalism shape their literary imagination. This is an attempt to see how novelists/writers deal with themes of loss, sexuality, identity, fear, insecurity and mobility – the vectors of exile and asylum that intersect at many points.

Sri Lankan Tamil migration is a sociological event which takes place in a historical and political context. The reasons for this migration have been political intolerance, wide spread violence and social exclusion. Like other migratory patterns, Sri Lankan Tamil migration too involved processes of departure, dislocation, dispossession, acculturation process in a host country which have left the scars of severe psychological wound, a trauma for the migrants. Writers like Shyam Selvadurai and Mary Ann Mohanraj have used narratives as means to articulate and to cope with these turbulent memories. These novels can be considered the efforts on their part to create literary afterlives that keep them rooted in the ethnic and cultural memories. Their novels abound in references to Sri Lankan Tamil cultural specificities – cuisine, language, religion and festivals. Such metaphors mark the process of the writer's/character's psychological adjustment to environmental and cultural realities of the country that provides them the political asylum. This adjustment process has the aim to move to a less conflict-ridden position – to occupy a cultural space in between the culture of origin and the newly adopted culture. The paper explores all these tenets and trajectories of Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora of the recent years.

**KEYWORDS:** Social Exclusion, Asylum Diaspora, Nationality, Faith, Linguistic Identity, Migration, Exile Diaspora, Regionalism, Ethnicity, Literary Imagination and Space

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Historical Background**

Writers of South Asian Diaspora have come to the fore of literary studies and culture studies in the recent years. These writers reveal in their novels various factors that propel actions like migration, writing, self-expression, sexuality

and search for identity. These novelists represent the sentiments and issues of 200000 Tamils in Western Europe, about 110000 in Canada and many more in other parts of the globe. Sri Lankan writers in Diaspora of Tamil ethnicity form a peculiar minority in exiles, who articulate experiences of marginalization and of being a linguistic and ethnic minority in both the homeland and the host nation.

## **LANGUAGE AND MIGRATORY ROUTES**

Linguistic discrimination in Sri Lanka has a long history. In 1956 the Sinhala only Act was passed in the Parliament, refusing to recognize Tamil as an official language. This was also a step towards homogenization of culture. The Act was also a move in the direction of excluding Tamil minority by refusing to recognize their language. This was followed by a series of anti-Tamil riots in 1958, 1977 and 1983. The riots of 1983 marked the beginning of two decades of murderous fighting born out of linguistic grudges. In 1971, the Sri Lankan government implemented the standardization of the education policy- setting higher benchmarks for Tamil students to enter to the Universities. This was another step towards policy of exclusion and intolerance. The Civil War happened in many phases, the last starting in 2009. After Vellupillai Prabhakaran was killed in an operation by the Sinhalese army, the UN brought out a report stating that forty thousand civilians may have died in the final months of the civil war.

Though the linguistic intolerance by the Sinhalese majority become more oppressive in the post-independence era of Sri Lanka, Tamil speaking subjects were always a minority in the country and has a long history of migration. Being a Tamil and the Hindu in Sri Lanka is being a part of minority folded up in minority. Further, Sri Lankan society for centuries together has been a complex blend of minorities such as Tamil speaking Hindus, Tamil speaking Muslims, Sinhalese speaking Hindus and Sinhalese speaking Muslims. Though these minorities were present in the cultural fabric of the country, neither their language nor their literary expressions were given the due credit by the Sinhalese speaking Buddhist majority. These communities were also made to be acutely unaware of their minority status. Like Jews in Europe, the members of the Tamil minority of Sri Lanka have been made to feel homeless right from the colonial days and hence, they have been forced to consider the option to migrate to Malaysia, India, the United Kingdom and the US. Sri Lankan Tamil writers in English have been alluding to these historical instances of migration- both of the colonial and the postcolonial eras to indicate that Sri Lankan society has always been hostile and intolerant towards the minorities.

## **MIGRATION AND ITS IMPACT**

After the initial wave of migration which happened during the colonial period and which was for better economic opportunities, till 1983 Sri Lankan Tamils were not inclined for migration to Malaysia and Singapore. However situation changed in 1983 when the Sinhalese Government in Sri Lanka introduced policies such as Sinhala Only Act which reduced drastically the opportunities for Tamils in Sri Lanka. Though Tamils were appointed in Civil Services in Sri Lanka before 1983, Sinhala Only Act exerted economic pressure on the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka and they were forced to take up migratory routes once again. Subsequently, when the Civil War broke out in Sri Lanka and with the active participation of Liberation Tamil Eelam, the Tamil minorities had to take up mass migration to escape the hardships and bitter realities of a country rocked by a Civil War. Initially, in the 1980s, the professionals such as doctors and engineers were the ones to migrate though the poorer segments who sold their properties to sought passport and ticket in search of asylum in other countries. It is estimated that nearly 800000 Sri Lankan Tamils left their homeland in an attempt to find refuge around the globe.

It is also possible to trace the presence of Sri Lankan Tamil migrants in Australia, especially in the plantations of Queensland; gold mining regions of New South Wales and the pearling industry in Western Australia. These migrants were visible as early as 1900. However, there was no further significant migration of Sri Lankan Tamils to Australia till 1948. This was also due to the Immigration Restoration Act of 1901 of Australia which excluded Non-Europeans from entering Australia. Later, in the 1980s more Sri Lankan Tamils migrated to Australia. It was again the push factor of Civil War that created an upsurge of migration. In the period between 1986 and 1996, the number of Sri Lankan Tamil migrants in Australia doubled. This wave of migration included skilled categories, families and professionals. The paper is an attempt to analyze Sri Lankan Tamil writers in Diaspora, who are using novels as social and cultural documents and considering them as sites of ethnicity and identity politics.

## REPRESENTATION OF MIGRATION IN LITERATURE

Shyam Selvadurai's *Cinnamon Gardens*, is concerned with ethnicity, nationality, and identity. This novel too deals with the ethnic oppression that Sri Lankan Tamils face though it set in a much earlier time frame. This novel also traces the migration of Sri Lankan Tamil subjects such as Balendran and Annalukshmi as they flee the political, religious and racial aggressions. *Cinnamon Gardens* is set in the world of upper class Sri Lankan Tamils of the 1920s – a period of political struggles for the Sri Lankan as they fought for independence from the British. The title of the novel itself refers to the colonial residential enclave of the upper class Sri Lankans. Operating within this world, Annalukshmi, a young school teacher and the daughter of a middle class Tamil Christian parents, has to suppress her private desires in honoring the social compulsions. Within the narrative of Annalukshmi is the story of her uncle, Balendran, the son of an aristocratic landowner who has homosexual desires. The novel is largely about the disappointments and experiences of these two lead characters who nourish desires contrary to the social norms. However, both Annalukshmi and Balendran are forced to conform to the society that they start denying, to some extent, their personal needs and desires.

*Cinnamon Gardens* can be read as an allegory of Sri Lanka, the island nation. The problems faced by Annalukshmi, Balendran, Arul and Seelan are representational of the Tamil minority and their victimization reflects the forces of oppression, ethnic intolerance and patriarchy that operate in Sri Lanka. Despite being multiethnic country, Sri Lanka was a site of many political and racial tensions caused by the refusal of the majority to accept others and their differences. These 'others', as the novel suggests, could be Sri Lankan Tamils, homosexuals, lower caste subjects, and the people of mixed blood. If 1983 Riots becomes the moving force in *Funny Boy*, the arrival of Donoughmore Commission provides the political backdrop in *Cinnamon Gardens*.

Sri Lankan writers are trying to heal the wounds of 25 years old Civil War strife by writing about the war atrocities and crimes through literature. They also try to maintain and keep alive their culture, language, festivals, dress, customs, food habits and ethnic identity through literatures.

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